

VZCZCXR07852
RR RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHLM #1055/01 3291127
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 241127Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8950
INFO RUCPDOC/USDOC WASHDC
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 3498
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1150
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 8148
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 6363
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2413
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8796
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6190
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 2408
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3038
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0856
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001055

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [KSTH](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [EAGR](#) [CASC](#) [WHO](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AVIAN INFLUENZA PREPARATIONS CONTINUE

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Sri Lankan health officials continue preparations to prevent an Avian Influenza (AI) outbreak in country. Repeated incidence of the disease in the region places Sri Lanka at risk of AI. Animal health authorities maintain monitoring activities while the Ministry of Health has increased human influenza surveillance in selected hospitals. Several donors, including the USG, are funding training and equipment supply programs to assist animal and human health officials to both prevent and prepare for a possible AI outbreak. While to date there have been no detections of the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus, low path avian influenza is present in wild birds and some poultry. Health officials remain concerned about transmission to Sri Lanka's north, where surveillance is difficult due to the ongoing conflict, via infected migratory birds from South India. Although Sri Lanka is on high alert, its ability to deal with a large scale outbreak could be hindered by a lack of resources. End Summary.

Country Risk Assessment

¶12. (SBU) Although Sri Lanka is an island nation, the World Health Organization (WHO), a key member of the government's task force on AI, and others consider highly pathogenic AI (HPAI) a serious threat to Sri Lanka. The large poultry industry, the prevalence of backyard poultry farming, the presence of a significant number of migratory birds, and the recent avian influenza outbreaks in India are key risk factors. No highly pathogenic H5N1 virus has been detected in animals or humans in Sri Lanka; however, low path AI is common among wild birds and some commercial poultry.

¶13. (U) Dr. Hendrikus Raaijmakers, WHO Emergency Health Management Specialist, informed post that there is the possibility of an outbreak of HPAI during the current migratory season given its occurrence in the region. To date, Sri Lanka remains in the first phase of the global pandemic: no new influenza virus sub-types have been detected in humans. Even if the virus is present in animals, the risk of human infection is considered to be low.

Government Initiatives in AI Prevention

¶14. (U) Sri Lanka established a National Preparedness Plan (NPP) to deal with the threat of AI in 2006. According to Dr. Raaijmakers, total funding required under this plan is around USD 16 million. The NPP is designed to enable the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka to

prepare for its necessary response in the event of an influenza pandemic. The plan describes the strategies and activities to be undertaken by the Ministry of Health, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Livestock, other key ministries, and related stakeholders in preparation for and in response to an outbreak of HPAI. The NPP includes detailed planning and coordination, surveillance, prevention and control, health system response and risk communication strategies. An inter-agency joint technical committee, comprising of representatives of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Livestock Development's Department of Animal Health, was formed and is responsible for implementing necessary measures to prevent an occurrence of HPAI and developing contingency plans for use in the event of an outbreak. An island-wide HPAI awareness campaign and development program is underway for animal health and MOH officials, the poultry industry, and farmers. It includes information on signs to look for in sick birds/humans and response procedures to be followed if poultry, wild birds and/or humans indicate influenza symptoms. Emergency response teams have been established to respond to unusual deaths of birds and poultry and lab facilities have been upgraded to detect HPAI.

¶15. (U) In light of recent outbreaks in India, surveillance programs have been intensified for the current migratory season. According to Dr. Paba Palihawadana, the government's acting chief epidemiologist, observation activities for influenza in humans are underway in 20 hospitals identified as sentinel sites. Surveillance activities carried out on poultry and wild birds have also been increased. Additional training for medical staff, stockpiling of anti viral drugs in the selected hospitals, regular testing of samples, and strengthening of port quarantine measures are also

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underway.

Demand for Poultry

¶16. (SBU) Retailer's reported a 15 percent drop in demand immediately after bird flu was reported in India earlier this year. The President of the Sri Lanka All Island Poultry Association, D.D. Wanasinghe, states that sales at live markets and processed chicken recorded a 15 percent drop in recent months. Industry officials are concerned that a drop in demand could lead to farmers compromising feed and other inputs to reduce costs. Feed is the costliest input in domestic chicken production which results in high retail prices, causing a reduced demand. However, demand reduction for poultry can also be attributed to existing high inflation which is reducing consumer spending power. Current retail prices of whole chicken average \$3.50/kilo. The average Sri Lankan finds it difficult to consume animal protein on a regular basis, given the relatively high prices of these items.

Donor Assistance for AI programs

¶17. (U) Director General of DAPH, Dr. Swarna Herath, appreciates of the role played by international donors to support the government's efforts in implementing an effective AI prevention and surveillance plan. Dr. J. Dharmawardana, the Director of Veterinary Research Institute (VRI) informed post that USDA funding for training opportunities, particularly the in-country programs carried out by the USDA experts, were instrumental in standardizing and developing protocols for effective laboratory testing and detection for HPAI.

¶18. (SBU) USDA is not alone in allocating resources to aid Sri Lanka in combating AI. Several donors, including USAID, USDA, FAO, WHO, and the World Bank, play key roles in assisting the government to implement an AI prevention and control programs in the country. Specifically:

--WHO provides technical assistance and consultancy on human health aspect of AI.
--USAID, in collaboration with FAO and the Department of Animal Production and Health (DAPH), provided nearly USD 1,000,000 to strengthen early warning and early response capacity and provide critical preparedness materials and equipment to Department of Animal Production and Health and other stakeholders.

--USDA provided training for several animal health officials in the U.S. and Taiwan, and supported experts in attending in-country practical training programs.

--World Bank provided a grant of USD 1.2 million to assist with the NPP.

Gaps in Preparations

¶9. (SBU) Technical cooperation among relevant government agencies, donors and other stakeholders is well coordinated. Donors are providing necessary financial resources to help the government upgrade its AI prevention and detection facilities and to build capacity. Local authorities have made commendable progress in improving capacity for HPAI detection in animals and humans. Inter-agency cooperation among government departments, a rarity in Sri Lanka, is excellent.

¶10. (SBU) Unfortunately, Dr. Raaijmakers reports that high level political commitment for AI has declined in recent years due to the absence of an AI outbreak. Implementation of the preparedness plan is slow; in particular, the communication component to general population needs to be expedited. Additionally, surveillance in the Northern Province is not at required levels because of a lack of animal health officials in the area due to the ongoing conflict.

COMMENT

¶11. (U) Sri Lanka's preparations for AI are progressing satisfactorily. It is key, however, that the preparedness plan be

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fully implemented to mitigate the impact of an outbreak; extensive surveillance is vital to achieve this objective. Continued USG assistance to provide equipment and training for GSL officials will support the country's commendable efforts to date in dealing with the threat of AI.

BLAKE